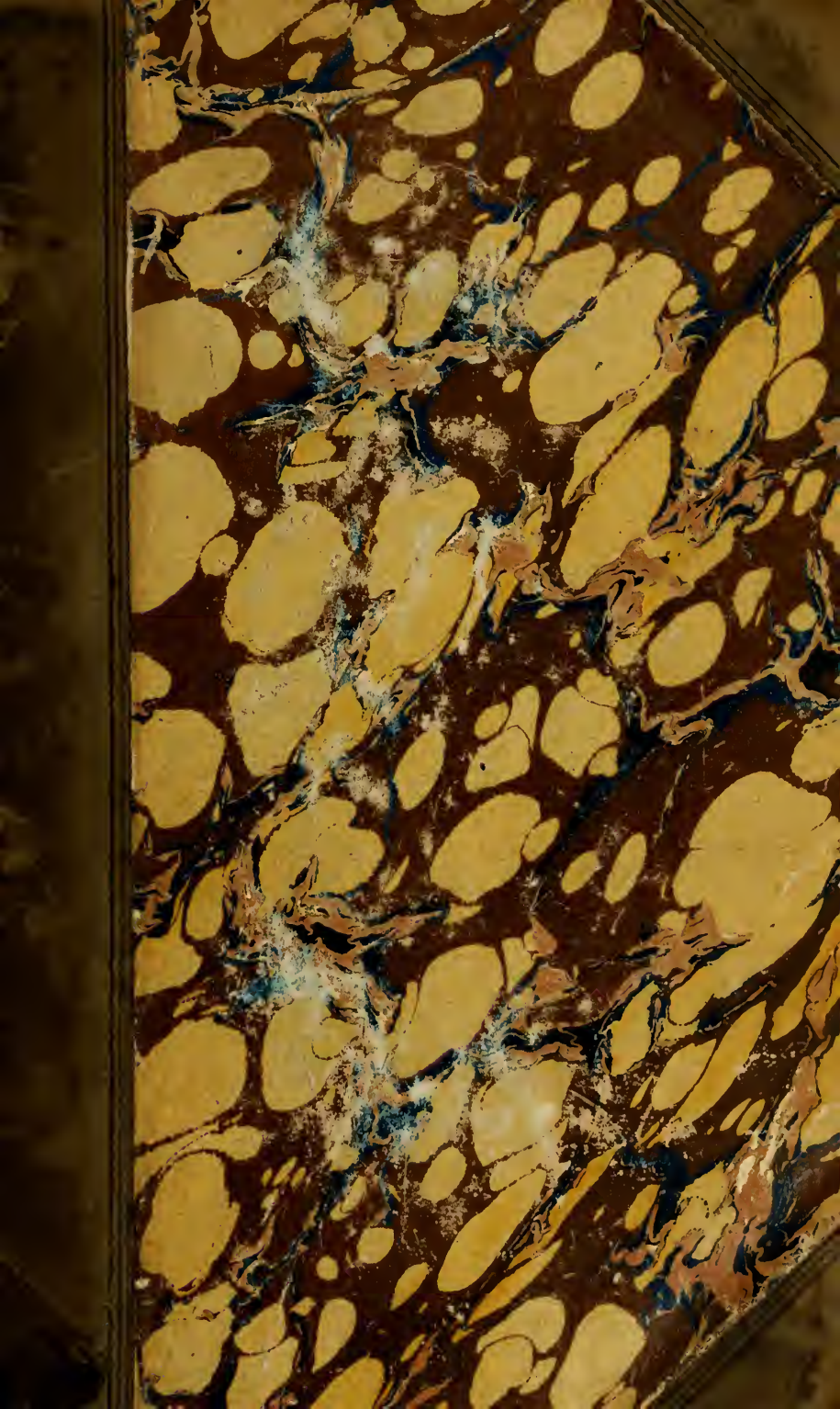

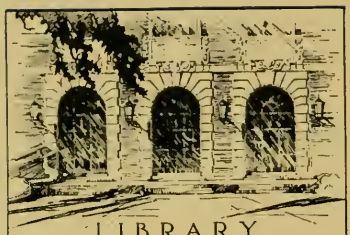

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Women Labouring in the Lord.

A SERMON

PREACHED

AT WANTAGE,

ON

ST. MARY MAGDALEN'S DAY, JULY 22, 1863.

BY THE

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VICAR OF HURSLEY.

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Women Labouring in the Lord.

ST. MARK xiv. 8.

"SHE HATH DONE WHAT SHE COULD."

THIS day's anniversary, my brethren, invites us to reflect with humble thankfulness how all along from the very beginning of the Gospel our gracious Master has condescended to make use of *Women's Work*, in preparing men's hearts for His kingdom, and in promoting it when its time came.

Before and beyond all, there is the momentous and mysterious decree, that we were to be saved by "The Child-bearing." Not without the instrumentality of a woman would the Great Almighty God vouchsafe to be made Man. "God sent forth His Son, *made of a Woman;*" through His mother alone partaking of the substance of our flesh; of a woman vouchsafing to be born, of a woman to be nursed, and in His man's nature cared for, and educated, and ministered unto, by a woman, until He was full thirty years old.

No other instance can come up to this; but it is observable how from time to time, doubtless not without a special providence, women were selected

to be His agents or occasions for new steps to be taken, new doors, as it were, to be opened, in the progress and diffusion of His marvellous mercy.

Thus, when He would shew Himself to the Samaritans, half heathen as they were, and prepare them for His Spirit which was to come, with His Evangelist Philip to convert and His Apostles to confirm them, He drew to Jacob's well, by His secret guiding, that Woman of whom we have all read, and caused her to inquire of Him the best way and place of worship. A woman was His first messenger to that remarkable people.

To a Woman, to her who had had an issue of blood twelve years, was given, in reward of her faith and humility, the privilege of being the first to have revealed to her the healing (might I not say the sacramental?) Virtue, which abode in the very hem of His garment, to meet the touch of Faith.

Women, as far as we are told, were the first who had the honour allowed them of ministering to Him of their substance.

In His last journey from Galilee to Jerusalem, in His lodging at Bethany, on His way to Calvary, around His Cross both before and after His death, beside His grave both before and after His resurrection, we all know what a part they took and how highly they were favoured. The Saint of this day, as has been often remarked, became an Evangelist, commissioned to announce the Gospel

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of the Resurrection to the Apostles themselves. She first found grace to see our risen Saviour, and with or without her certain holy women, as appears by St. Matthew's Gospel, were first privileged to touch Him. "They came and held Him by the feet." None of them indeed appears to have been present at His Ascension; but not without "the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus," did the Apostles after that event continue in the upper room, in prayer and supplication, waiting, as the Holy Ghost said by the Prophet, "for His loving-kindness in the midst of His temple."

And to crown all, the narrative in the Acts clearly implies that the Holy Spirit, when He came down, found the women praying with the Apostles "with one accord in one place," and made them partakers of Himself, sealing them with His blessings variously, according to the various work which He had prepared for them.

Thenceforward the daughters as well as the sons began to prophesy, the handmaidens as well as the servants had the Spirit poured out upon them; and they prophesied in that sense especially in which Miriam was a prophetess—in festival ceremonies, in holy psalms and hymns. Thenceforward, again, the Church had her deaconesses, or whatever they might be called, whom St. Paul so often salutes as "women that laboured with him in the Gospel," or "laboured much in the Lord." Whether wives, as Priscilla, whom God

enabled so to help her husband in the work of conversion that "all the Churches of the Gentiles" had to thank her; or widows experienced "in bringing up children, in waiting on strangers, in washing the saints' feet, in relieving the afflicted, in diligently following every good work;" or those, lastly, whom he congratulates as happiest of all, who were willing to "abide even as himself," caring only "for the things of the Lord," and enabled to attend on Him "without distraction."

Eminent of course among them, and over them all, Holy Scripture sets forth to us, from the Annunciation even to Pentecost, as the chosen type of the Church, and pattern of all Christian women, virgins, wives, and widows alike, our Lord's own highly-favoured Mother, the representative of the Christian as Eve was of the natural woman.

But were we to select any one saying of our Lord which more than others might seem to embody the whole duty of Woman, and the secret of accomplishing it so far as it is ever accomplished, it would not perhaps be far wrong to lay one's finger on the simple utterance, "She hath done what she could." "What she had, that she hath offered." Could any form of words more exactly describe the peculiar character of Christian Womanhood—a deep sense of helplessness, but a deeper sense of duty? That saying, with the occasion of it, stands out as one of the most noticeable among the few

instances—each of them strongly and distinctly marked—in which our Lord vouchsafed to utter words of personal praise to individuals in their own hearing. I do not believe that there are more than ten or twelve such instances altogether in the four Gospels, even if we include such sayings as "Thy faith hath made thee whole."

Very interesting and instructive it would prove to examine all these cases in detail: at present I will only point out that five of the twelve relate to women, and two of the five to the same woman at different times; that is, to Mary of Bethany, the sister of Lazarus. Of her in her hearing, Christ had said some time before, "Mary hath chosen the good part;" now He says, "She hath wrought a good work upon Me: she hath done what she could. Verily I say unto you, Wheresoever this gospel shall be preached throughout the whole world, this also that she hath done shall be spoken of for a memorial of her." O blessed woman, to be once and again so commended by Him who shall come to be her Judge, the Judge of us all! first, to be assured out of His own mouth that she was not deceiving herself; that the part which she was professing to have chosen was really the good part, that she had really chosen it, that it should never be taken away from her! Then as to the matter of the anointing: what would any one of us poor uncertain backsliders give to be quite sure of having pleased our Lord,

were it but in one action only of our lives? as sure as Mary of Bethany was that she had pleased Him in pouring the ointment on His head?

In both instances, you will observe, Mary had been attacked, and needed defence. Before, it had been her own sister who found fault, now it was Judas Iscariot, countenanced by some other of the disciples. Each time it was the same kind of censure, though proceeding from very different persons with very different minds. However, in neither case, perhaps, would it have seemed to us such a very pressing emergency. It was not as in former instances, when there were broken hearts to be healed, or heart-breaking responsibilities to be newly imposed: "a woman in the city that was a sinner" to be assured of entire absolution; or a poor fisherman to be charged with the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Here, it was simply an unfair judgment passed on a zealous worshipper's way of honouring her Master. But our Lord's tone in silencing the objectors shews with how deep and tender sympathy He marks the thoughts of His loving daughters' hearts. Mary was eminently a "tender and delicate woman," and would deeply feel both her sister's reproof, and the scornful, if not malicious, saying of Judas: the rather, as in both instances, opposite as the persons and their intentions were, what they said was plausible enough to disturb

a mind in the least degree scrupulous. "What sort of a devotion is this, which leaves a sister to serve alone? which lays out on ointments and perfumes, offered to Him who needs them not, a sum of money which might go a good way in feeding the hungry or clothing the naked?" Who can say that there is nothing in such a remonstrance? or that it will not tell most upon the good and kind hearts, that care most for their kindred and for their poor neighbours? Doubtless, as the bystanders and some even of His disciples entered into the feeling which the traitor was first to express, and broke out in tones of deep displeasure, implying that they were seriously shocked; so the beloved Mary herself could hardly help being in perplexity, as many on like occasions have been before and since.

But He that searcheth the hearts, and knoweth what is the mind of His good Spirit, the meaning and purpose which He puts into the sayings and doings of His holy ones, He interfered, as He never fails to do sooner or later on behalf of the humble and meek; He spake out words of wisdom and power, which have settled the matter for ever, to her and to the whole Church. Twice He spake: once to the traitor, and once to those whom the traitor was misleading. To Judas apart, "Do *thou* let her alone; against the day of My burying hath she done this." By His manner and look as well as His words He was speak-

ing to His betrayer's conscience; and startling him it may be with the thought, 'Surely this thing is known.' To the rest He seems to say, "Do *ye* 'let her alone; why trouble ye her? she hath wrought a good work on Me.'" To all, "For ye have the poor with you always, and whensoever ye will ye may do them good: but Me ye have not always."

The drift of His words plainly is, that both uses of our worldly substance are religious and right; that each must be attended to in its season: that as the poor and their claims can "never cease out of the land,"—they are always within reach, and we are perpetually to be helping them;—so there are special times and seasons, when such as love and honour our gracious Lord feel especially called on to lay out money in honour of Him, and as part of their witness to Him before men. One of these occasions would be of course His funeral; which our Saviour proceeds to speak of as a thing so near at hand, that to His all-seeing eye this pouring out of the ointment was as a part of the ceremonial, and was so taken by Him, though Mary herself knew it not, but was simply offering her very best to shew how dearly she loved Him.

We may remark by the way that His approbation sanctions and hallows all the little courtesies and self-denying services which Christians practise one towards another in their daily and common

life; all the kind attentions which the delicate loving heart suggests: while through a slight and almost imperceptible touch, in another narrative by the same Evangelist, we are made to understand with what a holy and charitable caution our Saviour would have us guard our own and other persons' demeanour on such occasions. The place which I allude to is in the fourth chapter of St. John's Gospel. The disciples, returning from an errand to the place where they had left our Saviour alone, "marvelled that *He was talking with a woman*." That, I believe, is the correct translation of the words: do they not imply a general rule of reserve in our Master's conversation, which for our sakes He vouchsafed to set Himself, and which all who desire to walk warily, and perfect themselves in His divine Image, would do well to bear in mind?

But to return to what took place at Bethany. Doubtless He intended in so rebuking Judas to convey to us a spiritual rather than a social lesson. It is commonly observed, and I see no reason to doubt it, that He designed here to adopt as a law of His spiritual kingdom the sentiment which He had so long before put into the heart of His favoured ones, under the dispensation of types and shadows. "The house which I build is great, for great is our Lord above all gods." Do not ask only what good will come of these noble buildings, of these graceful sculptures, of

these enchanting sounds, forms, and colours, and the like; but where your God is to be honoured, strive without stint to honour Him with your best in every kind; only taking care that it is *your own* best, that you are not giving Him what is not yours to give. I say, I cannot doubt that our Lord really meant as much as this: He was not merely condescending, as some have thought, to the innocent infirmities of His people, when He thus accepted outward beauty in holy things, but was promulgating a true part of the more excellent way.

But neither is this the main point to which His Scripture in that passage, and His providence by this day's ceremonial, would draw our attention. There is something broader, and deeper, and higher to be thought of. For the words express the great principle of *Sacrifice:* especially of such sacrifice as His lowest and weakest can offer. "She hath done what she could." "What she had—she herself, this very person and no other—*that* she hath offered—hath given it all unto Me." What more could have been said of the greatest Saint, nay even of the highest Archangel? yet what less can be said of the poorest and meanest worshipper,—nay, (for I will say it,) of the most grievous sinner, truly repenting and coming to God by faith? It is the rule, the great charter, of Divine equity: "If there be first a willing mind, it is accepted according to

that a man hath, and not according to that he hath not." Not, of course, that all saints are alike holy, any more than all sinners are alike bad and miserable; but that He who alone sees men as they are, vouchsafes in His mysterious mercy to accept them as they are, provided they truly submit and surrender their whole being into His hands.

"She hath wrought a good work upon Me." "She, this very woman whom you blame, this Mary of Bethany whom you are trying to put out of countenance for what you call a wrong way of manifesting her love,—I know that love, how deep it lies in her soul. I know her willing mind, what she would part with, what she would endure, if she could thereby save Me the least of the pangs that are coming on Me. She knows not yet of those pangs, but I who know them have put this instinct in her affectionate womanly heart, to pay Me this tribute while she had Me yet with her. I have by My warnings to My disciples, or in other ways known to Myself, caused her to have thoughts how it may be with Me before long. And having by her this costly thing, she humbly offers it for My acceptance, in token that she offers herself and her all, and would do so a thousand times if she could. And she shall not be disappointed of her hope. I accept her gift beforehand, as I shall accept what she, or others like her, will offer for My burial;

and My will is that her name and this which she hath now done shall accompany Mine own Name and the memory of My Passion in all ages and nations to the end of the world." Was this decreed, think you, for a special honour only to her, or was it not, in part at least, for our sakes? For our sakes no doubt this is written, that all people, nations, and languages, all sorts and degrees of the sinful children of Adam, might know how to draw near their Saviour—the Saviour of all alike—and be sure of a loving welcome.

Is there any one, for example, whose heart is newly broken with the consciousness, sudden or of gradual growth, that his or her life, be it much or little as men count life, has been hitherto worse than wasted; that every hour of approach to death has been an hour of departure from God;—any one who feels as though nothing remained to be offered but the dregs of earthly being; years that can have no pleasure, a polluted body perhaps, and a sin-sick soul; hopes blighted, and chances of doing good utterly cast away? yet let that afflicted one come to kneel at the feet of Jesus, and offer him or herself, with all that sin and sorrow, to be punished if need be, but pardoned if it may be; let such a man shew himself in earnest by doing what little he can in the way of confession and amendment, and so go on patiently waiting; sooner or later he shall hear in his secret heart, and hereafter it shall be said of him in the hearing of the

whole world, "This My servant hath done what he could; what he had, though it were but a wreck remaining of that which I had at first given him, he hath laid it all at My feet, he hath kept nothing back; therefore I own him for Mine, Mine wholly and for ever."

Suppose now a different case: a person brought up in the ordinary way, with a certain degree of knowledge of God and of our Lord Jesus Christ, and leading a respectable life—outwardly screened from great temptations, and not tormented with strong, inward impulses to evil; suppose, I say, such an one coming to see and feel after many years how low his standard has been, how lukewarm his heart, how much evil he has done, how much more good left undone, because he was simply contented to be as other men. But now he wakes up like Jacob, with a feeling, "The Lord has been here all the time and I knew it not: how dreadful is my condition! I have been going on all these years in a commonplace way, self-satisfied, self-approving, because my fellow sinners seemed to approve; and through that whole time the Saviour's eye has been upon me, His heavenly messengers, I now perceive, have been coming and going between me and Him: and where am I still? and how am I the better? I cannot go on so; what must I do that I may work the works of God?"

In many such cases, perhaps in the greater

part, the answer of Divine Grace to such a question will be the same as when it was once asked of our Saviour,—"This is the work of God, that ye believe on Him whom He hath sent." 'Do not attempt great things; make no sudden outward changes: whatsoever you do now in the way of duty, go on doing it, but strive and pray, pray and strive to do it all with a new spirit, as to Him who loved you and gave Himself for you.'

But in every generation of Christians there will be some to whom the Divine Voice will rather seem to say, 'If thy will, thy real longing, is to be perfect, sell whatsoever thou hast and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven; and come take up the Cross, and follow Me.' Happy they who find grace in either of these two ways to understand and obey their Lord's call. Of both it will be said, "They have done what they could."

But Holy Scripture teaches beyond all question, that those who have the higher call are the more highly favoured; and it is a signal mercy shewn to our time and country, that among Christian women especially that higher call comes to many more than it did in some former generations. The daughters of our people have been made aware, by many remarkable turns of Providence, how great a power has been given them for good,—great good to their sinful or suffering fellow-creatures, infinite good to their own souls,

—and what a pity and loss it has been, their having hitherto made so little use of that power. [And symptoms, I trust, are not altogether wanting, of something like the same holy zeal in our young Men also. Why should it not be so? Why may we not hope that even within this generation Christian Brotherhoods as well as Sisterhoods of Mercy may be found taking their place in the work of Christ among us? seeing that there is no more palpable fact in all Church history, than that Almighty God has ever been pleased to make use of such communities—devoted men severing themselves more or less from the ordinary ties and affections of earth—when His time was come for converting, not here and there one, but whole nations, to the obedience of His Son[a].]

It is well that the idea of Counsels of Perfection has become a little more familiar to some of us, were it only to counteract in some measure the tendency of our age to grow more selfish, as material comforts are brought more and more within reach. Indeed, my brethren, when we look round and see the condition of our poor, our forlorn, our sick, our children, and our fallen ones, how can we choose but pray earnestly for more Maries, if I may so speak, in Bethany? that He may increase the number and holiness of such as are willing thus to sacrifice and surrender

[a] The passage in brackets is slightly enlarged from what was said in the Sermon on this subject.

themselves to His immediate service. It is a great grace which you need, seriously to undertake such a plan of life; greater still, to carry it out soberly and with entire perseverance. Mary did not mind breaking the box in order to pour the ointment on our Saviour's head; and these our Sisters must deal somewhat rudely with themselves, if they are to pour out all that they are and all that they have — some more, some less, but each what herself can—on Christ's mystical Body; they must deny themselves many things which they would naturally, and otherwise might innocently, enjoy.

Will you not pray for them, and if you pray will you not give, lest your prayer prove a mockery? Will you not both pray and give to your power, that you may have some share in the comfortable words, "She hath done what she could?"

I will venture to add one word on a different but not altogether an irrelevant topic.

If any person's heart begin to fail him on account of evils which may be feared for our Church, when we look on present signs, and remember the foreboding intimation, "When the Son of Man cometh, shall He find faith on the earth!"—let such an one take comfort from our Saviour's way of encouraging Mary; "She is come beforehand to anoint My body to the burying." If the worst that any one now anticipates should take place,

then will be the time to remember that the mournful pleasure of waiting on our dying Lord was itself a great honour and blessing, and that it led to the joyful, unalloyed transports of Easter. So do ye, and so shall ye be rewarded: for His sake "Who liveth and was dead, and behold He is alive for evermore. Amen and Amen."

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